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DOES RAMADAN EXPIATE MAJOR SINS?

Does Ramadān Expiate Major Sins?

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بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ



Question: Does Qiyām of Laylat Al-Qadr expiate major sins and minor sins or is it just minor sins?

The answer is it only expiates minor sins because major sins need a specific Tawbah that fulfills the conditions of Tawbah. Ibn ‘Abd Al-Barr talked about this issue in his book At-Tamhīd and he was very stern about this. He said it’s ignorance to say that major sins are included in the forgiveness when doing such ‘Ibādāt, because if major sins are expiated by performing such deeds, such ‘Ibādāt, then no one will be left with any sin that may bring him into Jahannam والعياذ بالله, and he said that resembles the belief of the Murji’ah. And it appears, والله أعلم, that Ibn Rajab Al-Hanbali agreed with him on that. Keep in mind, that it's from the belief of Ahl As-Sunnah that if a Muslim dies without repenting from a major sin, Allāh سبحانه وتعالى may forgive him and He may punish him. There are many Ahādīth on this matter — and there are some specific about Ramadān — deeds that one does, where they attain one forgiveness from Allāh سبحانه وتعالى.

مَنْ قَامَ رَمَضَانَ إِيمَانًا وَاحْتِسَابًا غُفِرَ لَهُ مَا تَقَدَّمَ مِنْ ذَنْبِهِ

Whoever stands (in the voluntary night prayer of) Ramadān out of faith and in the hope of reward, his previous sins will be forgiven.¹

If one prays the nights of Ramadān إيمانًا, in faith to Allāh, and احتسابًا, seeking reward from Allāh, his previous sins will be forgiven. There’s an identical reward for those who fast Ramadān and there's an identical reward for those do the Qiyām of Laylat Al-Qadr.

¹ An-Nasā'i: 5027

مَنْ قَامَ رَمَضَانَ إِيمَانًا وَاحْتِسَابًا غُفِرَ لَهُ مَا تَقَدَّمَ مِنْ ذَنْبِهِ
وَمَنْ قَامَ لَيْلَةَ الْقَدْرِ إِيمَانًا وَاحْتِسَابًا غُفِرَ لَهُ مَا تَقَدَّمَ مِنْ ذَنْبِهِ

Whoever spends the night of Laylat Al-Qadr in prayer out of faith and in the hope of reward, his previous sins will be forgiven and whoever stands (in the voluntary night prayer of) Ramadān out of faith and in the hope of reward, his previous sins will be forgiven.²

And there are other various, different 'Ibādāt in Islām that attain one the same reward. In fact, some Ulamā' dedicated books to this topic. Ibn Hajr wrote a book on this topic, and [so did] Al-Khatīb As-Shirbīnī, and both of their books were titled Al-Khisāl Al-Mukaffir al-lil-Dhunūb. Al-Khatīb As-Shirbīnī listed approximately twelve deeds that attain one the forgiveness from Allāh سبحانه وتعالى. For example, in Sahīh Al-Bukhārī, pertaining to one saying Āmīn in congregational Salāh, the Hadīth says if one's Āmīn coincides with the Āmīn of the angels, all his past sins will be forgiven.

إِذَا أَمَّنَ الْقَارِئُ فَأَمَّنُوا فَإِنَّ الْمَلَائِكَةَ تُؤْمِنُ فَمَنْ وَافَقَ تَأْمِينُهُ تَأْمِينَ الْمَلَائِكَةِ غُفِرَ لَهُ مَا تَقَدَّمَ مِنْ ذَنْبِهِ

When the reciter says Āmīn, then say Āmīn, for the angels say Āmīn, and if a person's Āmīn coincides with the Āmīn of the angels, his previous sins will be forgiven.³

Similar to that is the day of 'Arafah and the day of 'Āshūrā. Fasting the day of 'Arafah is forgiveness for the year before and the year after and fasting the day of 'Āshūrā is forgiveness for one year before.

² An-Nasā'i: 5027

³ Ibn Majah: 851

صِيَامُ يَوْمِ عَرَفَةَ أَحْتَسِبُ عَلَى اللَّهِ أَنْ يُكَفِّرَ السَّنَةَ الَّتِي قَبْلَهُ وَالسَّنَةَ الَّتِي بَعْدَهُ، وَصِيَامُ يَوْمِ عَاشُورَاءَ أَحْتَسِبُ عَلَى اللَّهِ أَنْ يُكَفِّرَ السَّنَةَ الَّتِي قَبْلَهُ

I seek from Allāh that fasting on the day of 'Arafah may atone for the sins of the preceding and the coming years, and I seek from Allāh that fasting on the day of 'Āshurā may atone for the sins of the preceding year.⁴

In Sahīh Al-Bukhāri, when one makes Wudū' and offers two Rak'āt, not thinking about any worldly matters, all his previous sins will be forgiven.

مَنْ تَوَضَّأَ وَضُوءِي هَذَا، ثُمَّ يَصَلِّي رَكْعَتَيْنِ، لَا يَحْدِثُ نَفْسَهُ فِيهِمَا شَيْءٌ، إِلَّا غُفِرَ لَهُ مَا تَقَدَّمَ مِنْ ذَنْبِهِ

Whoever performs ablution like my present ablution and then offers two Rak'āt in which he does not think of worldly things, all his previous sins will be forgiven.⁵

If you pray two Rak'āt, without thinking about any worldly matters and perfecting the Wudū', that will attain him the forgiveness from Allāh سبحانه وتعالى.

Hajj expiates one's sins.

مَنْ حَجَّ لِلَّهِ فَلَمْ يَرَفْثْ وَلَمْ يَفْسُقْ رَجَعَ كَيَوْمِ وَلَدَتْهُ أُمُّهُ

Whoever performs Hajj for Allāh's pleasure and does not have sexual relations with his wife and does not do evil or sins then he will return (after Hajj free from all sins) as if he were born anew.⁶

⁴ Muslim: 1162

⁵ Bukhāri: 1934

⁶ Bukhāri: 1521

The point is, that there are many various 'Ibādāt that attain one forgiveness, and the majority of the Ulamā' — 'Atā, Ibn Muflih Al-Hanbali, Al-Qādi 'Iyād, Ibn Al-'Arabi Al-Māliki, Az-Zarqāni — they all stated and specified that the forgiveness in such Ahādīth is only for minor sins. And also, in the beginning, I mentioned Ibn Rajab Al-Hanbali and Ibn 'Abd Al-Barr and many other Ulamā', they specified that forgiveness in such Ahādīth is only for minor sins. Ibn Hazm and some others said, no, it also includes major sins.

Let me briefly state why the correct opinion is that it only covers minor sins. In Sahīh Muslim, the Messenger ﷺ said,

الصَّلَاةُ الْخَمْسُ وَالْجُمُعَةُ إِلَى الْجُمُعَةِ وَرَمَضَانُ إِلَى رَمَضَانَ مُكَفِّرَاتٌ مَا بَيْنَهُنَّ إِذَا اجْتَنَبَ الْكَبَائِرَ

The five (daily) prayers and from one Friday prayer to the (next) Friday prayer, and from Ramadān to Ramadān are expiations for the (sins) committed in between (their intervals) provided one shuns the major sins.⁷

These are more examples that attain one forgiveness. The Salawāt, from Salāh to Salāh, from Jumū'ah to the next Jumū'ah, from Ramadān to the next Ramadān is an expiation for the sins committed in between them if major sins are not committed. In this Hadīth, unlike the previous examples I mentioned, there's a stipulation that excludes major sins. In the previous examples I mentioned about Qiyām Al-Layl in Ramadān, Qiyām Laylat Al-Qadr, or the fasting of Ramadān, there's no stipulation in those Ahādīth — and the best method of explaining Ahādīth is with another Hadīth. Qiyām Laylat Al-Qadr, or the other deeds, don't specify anything pertaining to minor or major sins. The Hadīth is broad. Here, in this Hadīth, it restricts that.

⁷ Muslim: 233

وَرَمَضَانُ إِلَى رَمَضَانَ مُكَفِّرَاتٌ مَا بَيْنَهُنَّ إِذَا اجْتَنَبَ الْكَبَائِرَ

And from Ramadān to Ramadān are expiations for the (sins) committed in between (their intervals) provided one shuns the major sins.⁸

Ramadān to Ramadān is forgiveness of sins if one avoids major sins. The stipulation or restriction here explains what's broad and general elsewhere. The stipulation or restriction "*Ramadān to Ramadān is forgiveness of sins excluding major sins*" — that narration explains what's broad and general elsewhere in other Ahādīth. And this explanation, this meaning, coincides with the meaning of the verse,

إِنْ تَجْتَنِبُوا كَبَائِرَ مَا تُنْهَوْنَ عَنْهُ نُكَفِّرْ عَنْكُمْ سَيِّئَاتِكُمْ

If you avoid the major sins which you are forbidden, We will remove from you your lesser sins...⁹

And another point in this Hadīth — Salāh to Salāh is forgiveness of sins that are committed between them except for major sins — the Fard Salāh is mightier than the Qiyām of Laylat Al-Qadr and the Qiyām of Ramadān, and in fact, it's mightier than the Siyām of Ramadān. The Hadīth stipulates on an 'Ibādah mightier than all those other 'Ibādāt, that major sins are not covered in the forgiveness. If Salāh to Salāh — Salāh, the mightiest 'Ibādah after Tawhīd — does not encompass forgiveness of major sins, how would 'Ibādāt less in rank, like Qiyām of Laylat Al-Qadr, encompass the forgiveness of major sins? That meaning is emphasized in another Hadīth,

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ [4:31]

مَا مِنْ أَمْرٍ مُسْلِمٍ تَحْضُرُهُ صَلَاةٌ مَكْتُوبَةٌ فَيُحْسِنُ وُضُوءَهَا وَخُشُوعَهَا وَرُكُوعَهَا إِلَّا كَانَتْ كَفَّارَةً لِمَا قَبْلَهَا
مِنَ الذُّنُوبِ مَا لَمْ يَأْتِ كَبِيرَةً وَذَلِكَ الدَّهْرُ كُلُّهُ

When the time for a prescribed prayer comes, if any Muslim performs ablution well and offers his prayer with humility and bowing, it will be an expiation for his past sins, so long as he has not committed a major sin; and this applies for all times.¹⁰

Whoever perfects his Wudū' and Salāh, it's forgiveness of his sins, unless he commits major sins. It excludes major sins.

The bottom line is if Salāh, the Fard Salāh, or Jumu'ah — the mightiest deeds — if they don't encompass, the forgiveness of major sins that occur in between them, how can 'Ibādāt less than them in rank be forgiveness for major sins? And if the deeds we mentioned, the 'Ibādāt we mentioned, expiate both minor and major sins, then that renders no use or meaning to the 'Ibādah of Tawbah. There would be no need for repentance if deeds expiate major sins. If performing the five Salawāt and these other deeds give the reward of forgiveness for major and minor sins, that would cancel out the 'Ibādah of Tawbah, and the 'Ibādah of Tawbah is an order from Allāh. Allāh سبحانه وتعالى said,

وَمَنْ لَّمْ يَتُبْ فَأُولَٰئِكَ هُمُ الظَّالِمُونَ

And whoever does not repent — then it is those who are the wrongdoers.¹¹

Whoever doesn't repent, he's among the wrongdoers. It's an essential 'Ibādah, and its Wājib by the Ijmā' of the Ulamā'.

¹⁰ Muslim: 228

¹¹ [49:11]

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا تُوبُوا إِلَى اللَّهِ تَوْبَةً نَّصُوحًا

*O you who have believed, repent to Allāh with sincere repentance.*¹²

وَتُوبُوا إِلَى اللَّهِ جَمِيعًا أَيُّهُ الْمُؤْمِنُونَ لَعَلَّكُمْ تُفْلِحُونَ

*And turn to Allāh in repentance, all of you, O believers, that you might succeed.*¹³

Tawbah has its rules. It needs intention, it needs Istighfār, it needs regretting the past and planning on not going back to that sin in the future. If the Salawāt expiate major sins automatically, just by performing them, then there's no need for something called Tawbah, because they're constantly being erased.

¹² [66:8]

¹³ [24:31]